No. 23

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

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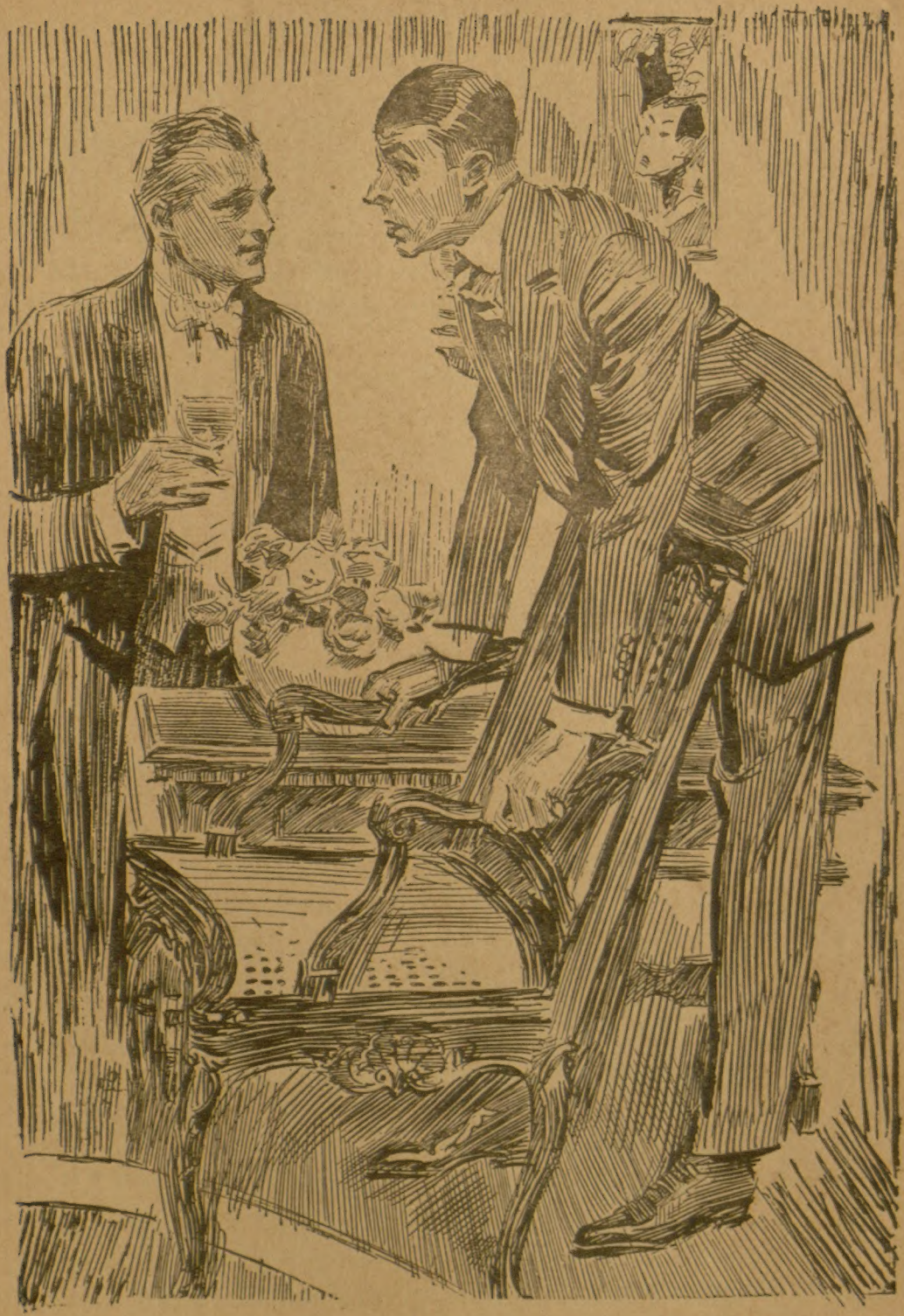

"It is the absolute and infallible truth about women," he said. "I have discovered about them in a bit of experience. With them all is vanity indeed."

R. of M. G., No. 23.

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MARIE DESMOND stood watching the horrible distortions on the baby's features as another convulsion became visible. Finally she could stand it no longer. With an impulsive motion she took the child from its crib and held it to her breast. Just then Annie came in, and it was a strange thing she beheld.

She stopped on the threshold, taking a sharp breath.

Marie, Philip Gordon's first wife, was carrying his child by a second wife in her arms and was crooning over it as if it were her very own. What a strange trick of fate!

As soon as the governess perceived Annie, she turned to her.

"You better find Mr. Gordon and tell him to come here at once," she ordered. "I am afraid the baby is dying."

Annie was only too anxious to carry this message. She had been on the verge of doing this very thing without being told.

Nothing could give her greater pleasure than to show up the second Mrs. Gordon whom she hated with all the vindictiveness common in her kind.

As chance would have it she caught the master of the house just as he was leaving the ballroom. But she did not approach him at once. Several of the guests were near.

But an instant later his gaze wandered in her direction, and she made a sign that she wanted to see him.

"What is it, Annie?" he inquired not unkindly.

"The baby is very ill," the girl informed him, then added hastily, and with malice: "All evening it had convulsions, but Mrs. Gordon would not send for the doctor because she feared it would interfere with the ball."

Philip Gordon grew deathly pale. His lips were

bloodless as they tried to frame a reply.

This news came to him like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. And yet he was not so very much surprised. Alice had never loved her baby. Upon several occasions she had given a shameful display of her utter indifference to it.

But it was incredible that this woman could neglect her own flesh and blood to the extent of allowing it to suffer and perhaps die without medical attention.

"Good God!" he muttered fiercely. "Now I know why she would not let me see the baby to-night before the ball. Yes, Annie," he added, turning to the latter, "you spoke the truth. My wife was afraid the baby's condition might interfere with her pleasure."

With a low exclamation that sounded like an oath, he leaped past the girl and ran up the stairs, taking three steps at a bound.

As he opened the door to the nursery, he came to a sudden halt as if petrified. He stared at the tall, slender woman in the simple dress who was holding his child in her arms.

He knew immediately who it was. This governess, an utter stranger, had pity for his child—forsaken by its neglectful, selfish mother and left at the mercy of a female brute like Nora Evans.

When Marie noticed him, she gave a frightened start.

Although she had sent for him, it did not occur to her at the time that she would have to meet him alone, something she studiously avoided.

But now that Phil stood watching her with that same half curious, half calculating expression in his eyes, the situation called for prompt action on her part.

"I am so glad you came, Mr. Gordon," she said, walking toward him with the baby in her arms. "Your

child is desperately ill."

Philip Gordon gazed at the little white face, saw the convulsive movements of the tiny body, and made a sound that was hard to define.

The brief survey told him that the baby was near death.

"Has—has the doctor been sent for?" he asked in a low,trembling tone. "If not——"

"I telephoned Dr. Van Buren and asked him to come at once," Marie replied. "I hope I have not taken too much upon myself. When I happened into this room and saw this innocent mite in these terrible convulsions, I was moved with pity. It is nothing short of a crime to leave the child alone."

Gordon stepped back, his mouth agape.

"Do you mean to tell me that no one was looking after the child?" he demanded, his anger rising.

"There was no one in the room when I entered," answered the governess.

He glanced once more at the suffering infant, his heart torn with conflicting emotions. When he turned away abruptly a tear rolled down his cheek.

But his grief was quickly replaced by a feeling of intense wrath against his wife.

"My God, such a thing doesn't seem possible," he murmured to himself. "Alice knew about the baby's conditions, and yet she deserted her. How dared that woman aspire to motherhood? But I'll bring her face to face with the result of her heartlessness."

Fierce determination written all over his pale features, he rushed from the room. Marie looked after him pityingly.

"Poor Phil," she said under her breath. "Poor Phil."

She had no idea that he was on the way to summon

his wife.

It is doubtful that she would have remained in the room had she suspected this. Her thoughts at the present moment were all of the suffering child.

Closer and closer she pressed it to her bosom, fighting back the tears that insistently welled up in her eyes.

If Dr. Van Buren would only hurry. There might still be a chance to save a human life. With a voice that broke occasionally she crooned softly, pacing back and forth.

In the meantime Philip Gordon was on his way to the ballroom.

With his teeth set and his hands clenched he struggled through the crowd of guests. Alice was not among them. Neither was Willard Parker.

Desperately he tried to assume the attitude of a genial host. He even managed to force a smile.

"Have you seen my wife?" he asked, addressing one of the female guests who happened to be standing alone near the door which led to the terrace.

The woman grinned sardonically and indicated the direction with her fan.

"I think you will find her out there somewhere," she told him.

With two long strides Phil cleared the space to the door. The next instant he disappeared. As he expected he found Alice laughing and chatting with Willard Parker on the terrace.

He took a firm grip on himself and approached them.

"Pardon this interruption," he said, frigidly polite. "I have come for my wife, Mr. Parker. Our baby took ill suddenly. You understand——" He paused, unable to say more.

Alice shot her husband a swift glance. She realized at once that he knew that the baby was suffering with convulsions. Someone had told him.

Fear rushed over her and she could not have spoken if her very life had depended upon it. Trying to appear unconcerned only made matters worse.

"I am sorry to hear that, Mr. Gordon," Parker was man enough to say. "If there is anything I can do, please let me know. Shall I go for a doctor?"

"Thank you, Parker," Phil returned coldly. "A doctor has already been called by phone and will be here any moment. But if you will be good enough to excuse my wife and myself to our friends, I shall be very gratful to you."

"I will gladly do so," the other responded. "I hope that the baby is not beyond hope."

Chapter 73

"THE CHILD IS DEAD!"

AND NOW came a task by no means agreeable to Gordon. He must pass through the ballroom appearing on the best of terms with this woman—this cold, selfish creature, this heartless mother whom he hated that moment. Silently he offered her his arm.

Alice took it with a bow to Willard Parker. Through the corners of her eyes she watched her husband, but the latter's face was like a mask.

They proceeded to the nursery, neither saying a word. Nora Evans had not yet returned and Marie was still pacing the floor with the fatally stricken infant in her arms.

Phil shook with anger and indignation. Alice experienced the same emotions at what she beheld.

She stood as if suddenly paralyzed when she recognized the woman who was holding her baby. But before she could venture a vocal attack upon Marie, her husband spoke.

"Did you know that our child was dangerously ill?" he demanded, pointing an accusing finger at Alice. "Did you?"

No reply was forthcoming.

"Of course you did," Phil went on, his voice rising with his anger. "I have brought you here where you belong to show you the result of your neglected duty. You knew that the baby was dangerously ill, you had seen its convulsions. And yet you insisted upon going through with this ball. What kind of a mother are you? Is there

no feeling, no shame in you?"

Yes, there was—apparently, for Alice's face was burning with shame. But it was not shame resulting from the realization of her sinful neglect.

It was the shame caused by being called to account in the presence of a servant, she hated—this Marie Desmond.

And she instantly proceeded to pour her pent-up wrath upon the latter.

"What right have you to be in here?" she cried furiously. "Who asked you to take care of my baby? Why don't you mind your own business? Give me that baby."

Alice almost tore the still weakly struggling infant from Marie's arms. The movement was brutal in the extreme.

Phil stood horrified, vainly trying to find words to fit the occasion.

"You—you have absolutely no right to assail Miss Desmond in that manner," he reproved sternly. "If anything, you ought to thank her."

"Thank her?" Alice snorted. "I thank her?"

"Yes, thank her," Phil repeated.

At this Alice burst into an ugly laugh.

The veins in Gordon's temples swelled to thick cords and his lean jaw worked visibly.

Marie gave him one glance and quickly left the room. She had no desire to be present during the bitter quarrel sure to ensue.

The instant the door closed behind her, Gordon whirled upon his wife.

"You have less right to be a mother than a dog!" he shouted, beside himself with fierce anger. "An animal will at least take care of its young, while you leave yours to die. But that is not the worst of it. You de-

liberately kept me in ignorance of the baby's condition so that you might enjoy the ball.

"Your damnable vanity drove you to extremes this night. Your craving for admiration has been satisfied I hope." His voice swelled to a shout as he went on: "Do you know what some of your guests think of you?

"You appeared half naked and you openly encouraged the attentions of other men. Do you know what kind of women do that sort of thing?

"But even that I could excuse had you shown the least feeling for that poor baby. To satisfy your craving for excitement and pleasure, you left it here to die alone. You placed faith in this Nora Evans, a person who ought never be permitted to live among decent people."

Alice returned not a single word. Her face, chalky white, was set in defiance. She pressed her lips tightly together.

And Gordon irritated beyond endurance by his wife's decollette gown and flashing jewelry, took a step forward.

Both of his hands were raised as if about to strike her.

"Put that baby down!" he commanded. "Put it down and get dressed decently!"

Something in his fierce countenance compelled Alice to obey in silence. She dreaded that frightful look in his eyes, but at the same time a feeling of intense hatred possessed her.

With a sharp intake of her breath she quitted the room and went to her boudoir.

Presently she returned attired in a simple black gown. As she opened the door she saw Phil seated beside the crib, his head bowed so low that his chin touched his breast. He seemed years older.

Just then Nora Evans appeared, coming in through another door. She instantly suspected what had taken place.

"Mrs. Gordon," she began, "I am sorry——"

At the sound of her voice Gordon sprang up.

"Get out!" he shouted, his fingers pointed at the maid. "Get out before I throw you out bodily!"

But Nora showed no inclination to go.

She shot an appealing glance at her mistress without receiving any encouragement. The next thing she saw the master of the house leap toward her like a mad bull.

"You will defy me, will you?" he snarled. "Get out or——"

Nora Evans did not wait to hear the rest. She made one of the fastest moves of her entire career when she fled precipitately and slammed the door behind her.

It seemed that Alice had lost her nerve. Never before had she seen her husband in such a rage.

She sank into a chair and remained motionless for quite a while. From time to time she directed a furtive glance at Phil, seated again at the little crib.

Twice she half rose as if to go to his side, but she could not find sufficient courage.

Dr. Van Buren's arrival put an end to the miserable silence. It cut her to the core to be ignored by the physician, who hurried past her to gasp her husband's outstretched hand.

"I am glad you are here, doctor," the latter said, his voice quivering with suppressed emotion. "Our baby is——"

The physician did not wait to hear any more. He bent over the little sufferer and examined her. From his bag he took several instruments and continued the task while Gordon stood watching him.

Alice had risen from her chair. With both of her hands pressed to her breast, she fixed her unsteady eyes on Dr. Van Buren.

No grief was depicted on her features. Intense curiosity, expectation and a wholesome feeling of dread dominated her.

Presently Dr. Van Buren completed his examination. The slow shake of his head told volumes.

Philip Gordon clutched at his arm.

"What—what is it, doctor?" he asked in a breath.

"There is no hope," was the response made with visible reluctance. "The baby can not live through the night."

Phil looked the physician squarely in the eyes.

What he saw there caused him to ask another question. He wanted to know if the child's illness was due to natural causes.

Again Dr. Van Buren shook his head.

"Not entirely," he answered, slanting a quick glance at Mrs. Gordon who now stood at his elbow. "There are evidences that the infant was given an opiate to quiet it. This brought on convulsions no power on earth could check. Who has been taking care of your child?" he demanded, turning to Alice.

"Nora Evans, one of my maids," the latter retorted.

"Was this Miss Evans in absolute charge?"

"She was." Alice paused a moment, then added hastily: "But I don't believe that Nora would give the baby an opiate unless you prescribed it."

"I did not prescribe such a drug, Mrs. Gordon," the doctor returned quickly.

He glanced at Phil, then allowed his gaze to wander about the room until it rested on the array of medicine bottles standing on the table.

Among them was a small vial which was a stranger to him.

"Ah, I thought so," he exclaimed, stepping forward swiftly and seizing the vial. "How did this get here?"

Alice stared at the object held up to her and every vestige of color left her face. Way down in her cold heart she cursed Nora Evans for her carelessness. Why had this vial been left on the table?

"I—I am sure, I don't know," she stammered.

"You don't eh?" Dr. Van Buren again glanced at Phil, who nodded his approval. "I presume this Nora Evans took it upon herself to purchase this opiate and gave it to your child in small doses whenever she considered it necessary for her own comfort.

"Yes," he added, as if speaking to himself, "I have known nurses to do that very thing. Not long ago one of these vain, heartless creatures put a baby to sleep with an opiate because she wanted to attend a dance. The child went to sleep alright, but it failed to awaken the next morning. This case here is a parallel.

"Either with or without your knowledge, your baby was drugged, Mrs. Gordon," he added, again facing the trembling mother. "The proceeding was almost a criminal one. As the attending physician I shall be compelled to inform the authorities of the method used in causing this child to die."

Alice winced and an expression of dread came into her eyes. She looked appealingly at her husband, who scarcely noticed her.

Phil had retreated a step and stood with both of his hands clenched. Mad fury possessed him that moment. Had Nora Evans been within reach he would have killed her without a doubt.

When he finally strode toward his wife, he threw

aside all restraint.

"I—I hope you are satisfied now," he said, his voice deadly calm. "According to Dr. Van Buren's statement you won't be bothered any longer with the baby. She'll die before morning. I—I wish I could find words to express just what I think of you and this beastly maid of yours.

"Between the two of you an innocent, helpless child was done to death. Between you that baby was murdered in cold blood. You heard what Dr. Van Buren said about this awful case.

"What the consequences will be I do not know nor care. If the authorities are called in on this case, you'll take your medicine, Alice. But I tell you this, there'll be no coat of whitewash for you.

"If Nora Evans is sent to jail, you go with her. I'll stand the disgrace—bitter as it will be. I'll——" He could go no further.

And then the woman who had repeatedly defied him, the mother accused of being partly responsible for her own child's death, broke down completely. She would have thrown herself in Phil's arm, had she dared.

With her face hidden in her hands, she dropped back into the chair and wept as though her heart was breaking.

They were not tears bordering on the hysterical. Her sobs were those of a woman whose soul had awakened to the horror of what she had done.

Dr. Van Buren was deeply moved. He was not the kind of a man who demanded an eye for an eye. A woman's tears always softened him.

"Perhaps I was a little severe in my diagnosis," he said, laying a hand on Gordon's shoulder. "I do not want to say that the child's death will result from an overdose of the opiate. Her condition, weakened by the

excessive heat, might have grown worse through natural causes."

Phil grasped the doctor's hand and pressed it warmly. He knew what his words conveyed.

"I am grateful to you," he murmured. "I — I could never have stood the disgrace of having my wife branded as the murderess of her own child. And," he made a motion toward Alice, "you better give her something to quiet her. If her tears are those of remorse, all is not yet lost."

Gordon summoned Annie, who led his wife from the room. Dr. Van Buren administered a sedative after which the woman seemed to grow more quiet.

When the physician returned to the nursery he found Phil seated at the crib and holding the baby's tiny hand in his. The convulsions had ceased and the breath came feebly.

"God, I'd give every dollar I own to save her," the unhappy father groaned. "Is there no hope at all, doctor?"

"None, my friend," came back.

Both men watched the infant for perhaps ten minutes. A sudden tremor ran over the frail little body. Dr. Van Buren applied the stetescope to the region of the heart and listened intently. Presently he straightened up.

"The child is dead," he announced.

And Philip Gordon wept.

Chapter 74

MORE TRICKERY.

THE NEWS of the Gordon infant's death put a quick end to the festivities. The guests began to leave, and those wishing to condole with the bereaved mother were told that she was in her boudoir under the care of a physician. Among those who keenly regretted the matter was Willard Parker.

He returned to Chicago very much disappointed. But his mind was made up to one thing. This was not the end of the secret love affair between him and the beautiful Mrs. Gordon.

Philip Gordon spent a restless night. A new epoch of his life was before him. True enough, he still had his two lovely children, but something had been killed within him that could never be revived.

Now that he had gained another insight into Alice's real character, she had become less than a stranger.

She had wept bitter tears, but what of that? He had seen her shed tears before. She had shown remorse before, only to defy him a moment later. No, there could be nothing more between them.

She was unworthy to be called his wife. She was unworthy to be called a mother.

As the gray dawn in the east announced the coming of another day, Gordon rose. After a shower bath he went back to his room. On the dresser stood the small vial which still contained some of the drug used.

With his face set in grim lines he proceeded downstairs to the library and sent for Nora Evans.

"What do you know about this?" he demanded angrily as he held the vial up to her. "Have you ever seen this before?"

"I—I have not," she lied brazenly.

"Well, I expected you to deny it," he cried, his anger rising. "I suppose you'll deny too, that you gave the baby some of this opiate from time to time."

"I do deny it." The girl tossed her head.

"Certainly you do." Gordon took a step forward. "A woman of your type is not used to telling the truth. It is a pity that I did not insist upon you leaving months ago . Our baby might still be alive."

"But—but I am not responsible——" she began, and Gordon silenced her with a vehement gesture.

"You are directly responsible!" he accused. "For your convenience so that your sleep would not be disturbed, you gave the baby this poison in small doses. They caused convulsions which ended in her death last night.

"There is only one more thing I want to say to you, Nora Evans. If you do not leave this house in an hour, I'll hand you over to the police. Now remember what I am telling you. You'll go to jail where you belong."

The girl trembled in every limb. She was just about to enter another general denial, when she met Gordon's eyes.

The look he gave her froze the words on her lips.

"Get out!" he thundered. "Get out and stay out!"

This forceful urging was not needed, however, for Nora Evans was already on the way.

Without consulting his wife, Phil began to make preparations for the funeral. The little body was laid to rest without much ceremony. Alice remained in her boudoir, refusing to see anyone.

After it was all over, curiosity more than anything else, prompted her to come downstairs. But if she expected that her huband would give her a smile or a kind, consoling word, she was doomed to disappointment.

The one look he bestowed upon her was one of unutterable contempt.

Open hatred was in his eyes, and something else that frightened her. With a shrug of her shoulders she returned upstairs.

"Alright, old dear!" she muttered fiercely as she began to pace the floor. "If the war between us is to be continued, I'll take care of myself. You hate me, but I wonder if you have any idea how I hate you. But you better be careful what you say to me from now on."

For a moment an ugly smile twisted her lips, then disappeared. Alice's mood was depicted on her features. She looked like a tigress driven to bay.

As matters stood now, she could not have anything but the most bitter hatred for her husband.

But one thought occupied her mind—she must be freed from the marriage tie which had become absolutely unendurable.

However, she knew Phil's iron will. Rather than give society a new scandal and again have his name dragged into the mire, he would carry his burden on to the bitter end.

And so Alice began to brood as to ways and means which might serve to cause her husband to apply for a divorce.

It was a few days later. Again night had fallen and a cooling dew gave respite from the heat of the day.

Marie Desmond, as usual, was taking a walk through the grounds.

The peace which reigned in the natural beauty of the surroundings soothed her weary heart and she could think without encountering external distractions.

Of course, Phil was uppermost in her mind. How her heart had ached for him when, after the funeral, he came to the nursery to see his children as if to find relief from his sorrow and hoping to find peace in their presence.

She had observed him sitting close to little Harry —his boy, the apple of his eyes, resting his head, bowed in grief upon his hand.

How close she had been to him. Her arm had actually gone out toward him. She wanted to embrace him and comfort him as she had done in the happy past.

But she had not dared. A move of that kind would lead to a revelation which only meant more misery to him. Fearing that her emotions would overpower her Marie had gone to her own room.

Ah, how she had prayed that she might be relieved from her terrible position, that she might not have to go through the rest of her life remaining a stranger to her own children, and that Phil's eyes might be opened.

His great unhappiness affected her deeply, and she was utterly miserable because she could offer him no consolation.

Buried in these thoughts, Marie walked under the trees, when suddenly she heard a few low-spoken words ahead of her.

As she was about to turn and go back, she saw two women whom she recognized as Phil's wife and Nora Evans. Unconsciously Marie retreated a step and then stopped. As a matter of caution she slipped behind a tree and listened.

Mrs. Gordon's voice came to her clear and distinct.

"Don't you worry about what my husband told you, Nora," she was saying. "You are going to stay right here. Let that fool rave all he wants to. You shall not leave my employ unless I sanction it. And you know, I'll never do that."

"But I am afraid of him," Nora protested, trembling. "You ought to have seen him when he told me to get out."

Alice laughed unpleasantly.

"His fits of temper don't mean a thing," she went on. "They never frightened me, and they need not alarm you. Now get the idea of leaving out of your head. I am responsible for you, and I'll protect you at any stage of the game."

"Very well, Mrs. Gordon," the girl answered. "I'll stay if you'll say so and back me up."

"You bet I'll back you up—and to the limit," was the quick retort. "Now let's get down to business. Here is the money you said you needed. But be sure that there is no slip-up. The end must come soon. She can't last much longer, for I noticed a decline in her health.

"I want you to——" Here her voice dropped to a whisper, and Marie, where she stood in breathless silence, could no longer hear what was said.

Presently Alice's voice grew louder. She had moved closer to Nora Evans and she said entreatingly with a hand on the girl's shoulder:

"I am leaving this thing to you now. As soon as anything happens, come to me immediately or let me know wherever I may be. This matter is of utmost importance to me. It will mean father's entire fortune. You may rest assured that you will be well rewarded."

"I expect to be," Nora Evans returned impu-

dently. "You must realize that I am taking all the chances."

"Yes, I know you are," the other woman admitted. "And as I said before, I'll see to it that you get enough money to keep you the rest of your days in comfort. That will satisfy you, won't it?"

Nora Evans wagged her head in agreement.

"Yes, it will," she told her mistress. "And I'll be mighty glad when it is all over with. I want to go back to the city and stay there. This country life is too slow."

"It's too slow for me too," confessed Alice. "And there will be an end to it before long."

Once more, Marie, in her hiding place, bent forward eagerly. She saw Mrs. Gordon rise and hold out a white object to Nora Evans. It looked like a sealed envelope.

"Take this letter to her," Alice said, then turned slightly. "I am going back to the house. Once more, remember everything I told you, Nora. Be careful and don't fail to keep me informed. By the way," she added, "I am planning to take a trip somewhere. I'll tell you about that later."

Having said this, Mrs. Gordon patted the girl on the back. Nora took the letter and also a roll of money. A few more words were exchanged which Marie could not hear.

Alice disappeared presently and so did Nora Evans, both going in opposite directions.

Marie was dumbfounded. What did it mean? Annie had told her of Nora Evans' discharge. And here was the mother of the practically murdered Gordon baby in secret conference with the servant, whom, by every law of nature, she should detest.

What was there between the usually haughty wife of Philip Gordon and this very ordinary Evans woman?

Surely they shared a secret of some kind.

And who was the third woman of whom these two spoke? Why that letter and why did that roll of bills change hands? Question after question passed through Marie's rapidly moving mind.

Ah, what wouldn't she have given to be able to answer them.

But of one thing Marie was absolutely positive—there was an alliance between Phil's wife and Nora Evans, the discussion of which were by necessity carried on in secret.

And this third woman they mentioned must be a victim of theirs.

With an impatience born of an over-active mind, Marie strode on through the grounds. Directly ahead of her was a clump of giant oaks.

To the left was another row of tall trees. To the right was the lake and the rustic bridge beyond which stood the pavilion.

She cast a glance over her shoulders where the magnificent Gordon home rose in the pale moonlight. The silence was so intense that she could hear her own heart beat.

Suddenly she became conscious of something moving some distance away. Looking closer she discovered that it was the figure of a woman.

Marie knew it was not Mrs. Gordon, nor was it Nora Evans. This woman, apparently young, was a total stranger. And even had she been able to see her face, it is doubtful that she would have recognized her.

With a quick move the governess hid behind some shrubbery and waited.

The woman was coming in her direction with a slow, draggy step.

It seemed that she had difficulty in holding herself

erect. That she sank upon the grass only a few yards from where Marie crouched was most likely due to a sudden attack of faintness.

She began talking to herself at random first, then her voice increased in volume. Marie listened, her senses keenly alert.

"Oh, I am sick of it all." The words came to the silent observer, carried on a gentle breeze. "This can not go on much longer. Life has become an endless misery. If I could only die in peace. Yonder is the lake—ah, if I had the courage to end it right now."

Marie made an impulsive motion toward the strange woman so obviously distressed.

She was ready and anxious to help her. But the next instant something happened that was entirely unexpected.

Nora Evans darted forward like a dark, ominous shadow. She caught the young woman by the shoulder and jerked her roughly to her feet.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded harshly. "You ought to know better than expose yourself in this way. Do you know what would happen to you if you were caught? You were warned repeatedly not to take any chances. Why do you do it?"

"I could stand it no longer," was the retort. "The solitude was killing me, and the musty atmosphere in the tower stifles me. All I wanted was a breath of fresh air. There is no harm in that, and I am sure Alice would not say——"

"That's alright," the Evans woman interrupted in the same harsh tone of voice. "You beat it back to the tower and stay there."

As they disappeared, the one in the strong, unrelenting grip of the other, Marie experienced a sudden desire to follow them and solve this mystery. But upon

second though she decided that this would be unwise.

If Nora Evans caught sight of her, as she surely would, every chance of clearing up this strange affair was lost.

She realized that secrecy must be fought with secrecy. Trickery must be combatted with trickery.

Slowly she faced about and walked toward the house, her head bowed in serious reflections.

Quietly she stole into the nursery to make sure that her two darlings were protected against the cool night air by sufficient bed covering.

She breathed a tender kiss upon the cheek of each, then glided out into the hall and entered her own room.

But it was a long while before she finally fell asleep. And in her dreams she could still see the unhappy woman, and she could hear her weak, complaining voice. It was a familiar voice, too.

Chapter 75

FATEFUL NEWS

THE BREAK between Philip Gordon and his second wife had been widened to such a degree that no human agency could ever bring about a reconciliation. Suspicion and distrust, coupled with the realization that Alice had not a single redeeming feature in her whole personality and soul, caused Phil to treat her as an utter stranger in his own home.

The feeling Alice harbored toward him was of an even more disagreeable nature. Hers was the bitter realization that her every trick had failed, and that Phil had learned to know her as she was.

Even her shameful attempt to arouse his jealousy fell flat. She had consorted with Willard Parker, a social down-and-outer, and made herself the laughing stock of her set. And for what? Philip had not shown the least concern.

His indifference had amazed her at first, then angered her. Finally she concluded that his love for her was dead indeed.

In fact she began to wonder if he had ever loved her. Of course, there had been moments, when arrayed in all her finery and alluring beauty, she had aroused him from his lethargy. But they had been few and far between. And he had never completely succumbed.

Affairs in the Gordon household finally reached the stage when Alice took all of her meals in her own suite of rooms, while Phil seemed quite content to eat in the dining room accompanied by old John Procter, his father-in-law.

Procter made several attempts to pour oil upon troubled waters, but when he saw how useless it was, he gave it up. However, he remained loyal to Philip Gordon in the course he knew to be right.

The latter endeavored to find forgetfulness by devoting himself to his fast growing copper business and his two lovely children.

But even these distractions were insufficient to make him forget his lost happiness. Ever so often his mind strayed back to the days when he enjoyed the society of his first wife.

Ah, there had never been a women in all the world like Marie.

One morning as Philip Gordon entered the library to look over his private mail, he was surprised to find a large, bulky envelope which bore the postmark "Bar Harbor".

The handwriting was not that of his sister Ruth. But the address had been written by a woman. He was sure of that.

"Oh, it is from Olive Bentley," he murmured to himself. "But why is she writing to me instead of Ruth? I hope that madcap sister of mine did not get herself into some new trouble."

Ripping the envelope open, he settled himself back in his chair comfortably to peruse its contents.

There was a long letter, of course. But there was also a full newspaper page which contained an article which attracted his attention at once. The heading of this item in big black type said:

"Prominent Novelist and Playwright Murders Actress."

Then followed several lines if sub-headings, telling in terse sentences of the double tragedy in the famous Maine watering place. The ensuing and lengthy

article explained everything in detail.

Philip Gordon had begun to wonder why Olive Bentley should send him this, when he saw his sister's name mentioned in connection with the affair.

"I'll be damned!" he exclaimed, his lean jaws closing with a snap.

But his anger softened as he read on. No, thank God, Ruth had nothing to do with the double tragedy. She was merely a part witness of one and had seen, in the company of others, how Carlton McLain met a well-deserved fate.

The only thing that brought a continued frown to his face now was the fact that the authorities were holding his sister as a material witness.

Throwing the paper aside, he reached for the letter. It had been written by Olive Bentley, and this is what it said:

My Dear Phil:

I hope the affair chronicled in the enclosed newspaper will not lead you to believe that Ruth was in any way to blame. We all consider it most fortunate that she went with McLain the night of the Vera Browning murder.

If it had not been for her, the police would still be searching for the guilty culprit, with McLain, the murderer at large.

At the outset it might be well to make a few explanations so that you will fully understand why your sister and I happened to become mixed up with the double tragedy.

Vera Browning, the actress, and in private life the wife of Dr. Daniel Pogue, had engaged

McLain to write a play for her.

After it was finished she refused to accept the play, claiming it held her up to ridicule. McLain threatened to turn the play over to some other theatrical producer in New York.

This angered Miss Browning. The manuscript, left on the library table in her home, was burned. The actress insisted that McLain himself was responsible.

According to her statement he had inadvertantly placed a lighted cigarette on top of the manuscript.

However, the popular belief is that the actress deliberately set fire to the manuscript during McLain's absense, thus preventing him from making good his threat of selling the play to someone else.

McLain, angered beyond reason, decided to get even with Vera Browning. He went to the Browning home at a late hour, having prevailed upon Ruth to accompany him. He told her it was to be a lark.

Your sister entered into the spirit of the thing, little dreaming that McLain harbored sinister intentions.

While McLain went upstairs and murdered the actress by giving her chloroform, Guy Fillmore, a guest at the Browning home, was awakened. As soon as it was discovered that Miss Browning was dead, the entire neighborhood was alarmed.

McLain returned coolly after having fled, and announced that Dr. Pogue was the murderer of his wife.

But as it happened, Ruth had seen McLain

c me from the physician's room where he h< gone to procure the drug. When she made know this fact in the presence of others, the murdere fled.

He was pursued to the old stone quarry where fate overtook him. Now please do not be alarme so far as Ruth is concerned.

When you sent her to me I promised to take the best of care of her, I have endeavored to do that.

The commonwealth of this state will owe her a vote of thanks, for if it were not for her testimony McLain would in all probability have escaped and an innocent man would be in prison awaiting trial for Vera Browning's murder.

As soon as this affair is settled, which I think it will be in a few days, I'll send Ruth back to Chicago.

However, I would rather keep her here for at least another month. I mentioned Guy Fillmore somewhere in this letter. He is a most estimable young man and very much interested in your sister.

He has a wonderful future ahead of him and had I a sister of my own, I would gladly entrust her happiness to his keeping.

But this is a matter for you to decide. I might further state that these two young folk are deeply in love with each other. I don't think that you or I have a right to spoil their dream.

Please give this matter your most earnest consideration, and I shall await your reply with interest and some anxiety.

As always, your loyal friend:

Olive.

Philip Gordon leaned back, his brow clouded in deep reflection. This news, coming close upon the heels of the baby's burial acted rather like a stimulant.

It made him forget, at least for a time, the almost unbearable situation in which he found himself now in his own house.

Every word in Olive Bentley's letter he believed as he believed in God. She was one of the few women he cared to remember. To insist upon Ruth coming home now would further complicate matters.

Already his load of trouble was so heavy that his shoulders began to stoop. He felt glad that his sister was away at this time, and she was indeed in good hands.

So she had fallen in love with a young man whose future looked bright. He smiled as he read again Olive's warm praise of this Guy Fillmore. He fully agreed with her that they had no right to spoil their dream.

It did not take Gordon very long to arrive at a conclusion. He put the letter and newspaper away carefully, then sat down to write to Olive Bentley. He expressed his deep gratitude for all she had done for Ruth.

"I fully agree with your suggestion that my sister remain another month with you," he wrote. "Present conditions in my household are not at all what they should be. We just lost our baby and the manner in which she died was the basis for another bitter quarrel with my wife. What the eventual outcome of my domestic difficulties will be is hard to guess.

"So far as Ruth's love affair with this young Guy Fillmore is concerned I am perfectly satisfied to allow you to handle that. He must be alright if you say so, for you were always so exacting with men. As I mentioned in a previous letter, Ruth has a good heart, but her impulsiveness needs curbing.

"But I need not dwell upon that further. By this

time you no doubt know her more intimately than I do. If those young folk want to be married. I have no objection. But please keep me informed if such an event should take place."

Gordon added a few more sentences. insisting that he must foot all the bills in connection with his sister's prolonged stay at Olive Bentley's cottage in Bar Harbor.

Then he put the letter in an envelope, sealed it and placed it in his pocket. It was his intention to mail it immediately upon the arrival at his Chicago office.

As he went into the dining room to eat breakfast, he was somewhat surprised to see his father-in-law missing.

"Where is Mr. Procter this morning?" he asked one of the servants.

"He sent word that he is not feeling so well," Phil was told.

He ate his first meal of the day in morose silence. The morning paper lying beside his plate as usual failed to attract him.

Suddenly he heard the swish of silk skirts and the next moment his wife entered.

She stood before him dressed in a morning gown of costly lace and ribbons. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed.

Not the least sign of sorrow marked her features. Most emphatically she was not a grief-stricken mother who had but a few days before buried her own child.

"Phil," she began without further ceremony, "I have decided to go away for a while."

"Have you?" He looked her over deliberately. What an enticingly beautiful creature she was. "May I inquire why you made that decision?"

"You may, and I'll tell you," she snapped. "I had a letter from an old schoolmate of mine in Hollywood—

Gloria Marsdon. You know her. Everybody does. She asked me to come and spend a whole month with her."

He nodded, looking past her.

"Ah, I see, Alice."

Alice, annoyed at her husband's silent indifference which followed these words, paled a trifle.

"I am going because life in this god-forsaken place has become unendurable to me," she said. "What I need is a complete change of surroundings, and I am determined to have them."

Again he stared past her, evidently considering.

Suddenly he rose and he fixed his piercing eyes upon hers.

"Are you going alone?" he demanded.

"What difference can that make to you?" she laughed impudently.

"Not much in one way, and quite a lot in another," Phil returned without hesitancy. "You still bear my name and I propose to see to it that you do not drag it down to the gutter."

Alice tossed her head.

"How suspicious we have become," she sneered. "Well, I can't blame you very much. Some of your experiences with women were hardly of a pleasant nature. Take your first wife for instance. Marie——"

"Stop!" His hand was raised. "Don't you dare mention her name in that slurring tone."

A nasty smile crossed the woman's face.

"Alright," she answered. "I won't. But you have not told me yet that I can go. I hope you won't refuse. Remember the old saying, 'absence makes the heart grow fonder.' Perhaps you will like me better at a distance."

Gordon turned his head. Somehow he could not bear to look at his wife this morning.

Continued in next number

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